DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 163 TM 810 127

TITLE	Implications for Minority Groups of the Movement Toward Minimum-Competency Testing. A Symposium presented at the 1979 Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Princeton, N.J.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Dec 79
CONTRACT	400-78-0003
NOTE	27p.: Each paper included is available through ERIC as follows: ED 178 616, ED 178 615, ED 178 617, and ED 178 618.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ 08541 ($2.50 each).
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Discrimination; *Educational Opportunities; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; *Minority Groups

ABSTRACT

Proceedings of the symposium on Implications for Minority Groups of the Movement Toward Minimum-Competency Testing (MCT) include the following papers: (1) "Implications of Minimum-Competency Testing for Minority Students" by A. Graham Down, who asserts that MCT offers more hope than any development in public school policy since 1954 for realizing the educational aspirations of minority students and parents; (2) "Do Minorities Embrace the Concept of Minimum Competency?" by Ronald H. Lewis, who answers in the affirmative and suggests that a system of competency-based education is needed, not merely MCT; (3) "Minimum-Competency Programs, Protected Classes, and Federal Agencies" by M. Hayes Mizell who discusses two examples of federal agencies which administer laws fundamental to the protection and advancement of the educational interests of minority children; (4) "Minimum-Competency Testing: The Newest Obstruction to the Education of Black and Other Disadvantaged Americans" by Hugh J. Scott who insists that the conceptual deficiencies of MCT as well as the potential negative consequences it may engender are sufficient reasons for broad opposition within the educational profession; and (5) "Reflections on the Issues and a Proposal for Dealing with Them" by Robert A. Feldmesser, organizer of the symposium. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED198163

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINORITY GROUPS OF THE MOVEMENT TOWARD MINIMUM-COMPETENCY TESTING

A SYMPOSIUM PRESENTED AT THE 1979 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON MEASUREMENT IN EDUCATION.

TM 810 737

ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation
Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ 08541, 609-921-9000

The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to qualified professionals for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either these reviewers or the National Institute of Education.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation
Educational Testing Service
Princeton, NJ 08541

December 1979

CONTENTS

Introduction
Eleanor V. Horne 1

Implications of Minimum-Competency Testing for Minority Students
A. Graham Down 3

Do Minorities Embrace the Concept of Minimum Competency?
Ronald H. Lewis 6

Minimum-Competency Programs, Protected Classes, and Federal Agencies
M. Hayes Mizell 9

Minimum-Competency Testing: The Newest Obstruction to the Education of Black and Other Disadvantaged Americans
Hugh J. Scott 14

Reflections on the Issues and a Proposal for Dealing with Them
Robert A. Feldmesser 18

INTRODUCTION

The most honorable of the manifest motives behind minimum-competency testing are to provide assurance to the public that students are able to perform certain basic tasks involving the use of the languages of English and mathematics and to stimulate improvements in the educational processes that are supposed to develop those abilities. At the same time, however, the establishment of procedures for certifying that students have indeed acquired the specified competencies provokes questions about other possible consequences. Among the most troubling of these questions are those growing out of the programs' effects on students from minority groups. Given the history and the present status of education in the United States, it is very likely that larger proportions of minority than of majority students will fail to attain the designated minimum score on tests that are the instrumentalities of the minimum-competency programs. How ought this outcome be dealt with? Should states go ahead with their programs on the grounds that minority as well as majority students will benefit in the long run? Should implementation of the programs be deferred in order to avoid yet another injury to minority-group members? Are there ways of conducting minimum-competency testing programs that would accomplish their purposes while minimizing the social damage to minority groups? Is there a compromise or tradeoff that would be acceptable to all the parties concerned?

To address these questions, Robert A. Feldmesser, a senior research sociologist with Educational Testing Service, organized a symposium at the 1979 meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, which was held in San Francisco. In recognition of the significance of the issues, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation encouraged and supported Dr. Feldmesser's efforts and agreed to publish the proceedings of the symposium in order to bring them to the attention of a wide audience. The participants were selected in the belief that they would make forceful presentations of varying points of view. These participants were:

A. Graham Down, executive director of the Council for Basic Education, Washington, DC. He holds degrees from Cambridge and Oxford and from the Royal College of Musicians. Between 1955 and 1974, when he assumed his present position, he served in a number of capacities in the educational system of the United States—teacher of history and of music at the secondary level, assistant to the president of a junior college, and assistant director of the Advanced Placement Program and of the New England regional office of the College Board.

Ronald H. Lewis, superintendent of schools, Plainfield, NJ. He has received an Ed.D. from Fairleigh Dickinson University and has been a teacher and administrator in public schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and also served for four years as a deputy assistant commissioner of education for New Jersey. Since becoming superintendent in Plainfield, he has also been chairman of the Graduation Requirements Committee, appointed by the governor of New Jersey to recommend policies for performance standards for high school graduation in the state, and co-chairman of the Minority Advisory Committee to the Statewide Advisory Committee on Minimum Standards.

M. Hayes Mizell, associate director of the Southeastern Public Education Program of the American Friends Service Committee. He earned his bachelor's degree at Wofford College and has done graduate work at the University of South Carolina and at Johns Hopkins. He was director of the Southern Student Human Relations Project of the National Student Association, and since 1966 has worked for the AFSC in several capacities connected with that organization's educational and community activities in the south. For his accomplishments and publications, he has received awards from the American Civil Liberties Union of South Carolina, the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, and the South Carolina Education Association.

Hugh J. Scott, dean of programs in education at Hunter College. He holds an Ed.D. from Michigan State University (and has received a Distinguished Alumni Award from its College of Education) and has served as assistant superintendent of schools in Detroit and as the first black school superintendent in the District of Columbia. Before going to Hunter, he was professor of education at Howard University. He is author of *Messiah or Sacrificial Lamb? The Emerging Black School Superintendent.*

Dr. Feldmesser has a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University and taught sociology there and at Brandeis University and Dartmouth College before going to ETS in 1969, where he has specialized in educational policy research. In addition to organizing the symposium, he chaired it and served as discussant; his remarks made in this last capacity are included in this publication.

We hope that the appearance of the symposium proceedings in print will sensitize the educational community and the general public to the issues involved and will stimulate discussion and a search for satisfactory solutions.

Eleanor V. Horne
Associate Director, ERIC/TM

IMPLICATIONS OF MINIMUM-COMPETENCY TESTING FOR MINORITY STUDENTS*

A. Graham Down

The Need for MCT

Minimum-competency testing (MCT) offers more hope than any development in public school policy since the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Topeka Board of Education* for realizing the educational aspirations of minority students and parents. Having set forth so sweeping a thesis, let me add that I'm not unmindful of the public debate now raging on the merits of MCT. But a careful listener notices that most of the arguments lodged against MCT are really observations about the abuses of testing. We must beware of bickering over testing in general while we are trying to discuss the implications of a particular kind of testing program for a particular group—minorities.

There need be no debate about what minimum-competency tests are revealing about the extent of our inability to educate all of our children, especially minority children. Programs in New York City and Virginia illustrate the discouraging results of current basic education efforts.

Concerns about MCT

In the light of early returns from MCT programs and all that has happened in public schools in the last 25 years, it is not hard to understand why black people and members of other minority groups may not trust MCT. The NAACP Legal and Educational Defense Fund has already begun court tests in Florida and North Carolina and is considering legal actions elsewhere.

As Merle McClung (4) has pointed out, the grounds for possible legal warfare are many, including: the adequacy of the phase-in period, the match between tests and instruction, both past and subsequent discrimination, and the rationale for setting minimum standards.

Americans Want MCT

Despite persistent and justifiable reservations, recent Gallup Polls of attitudes toward education give persuasive evidence that Americans—including minori-

*This is a condensation of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, April 9-11, 1979. The full text of the paper can be obtained as ED 178 616 from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

ties—want minimum-competency testing programs. Roughly 90 percent of all races favor establishing minimum standards for grade-to-grade promotion as well as for high school graduation, and 80 percent are certain that children who fail to meet minimum-competency standards should be given prompt and ample remedial education.

Evidence is beginning to mount that properly managed MCT programs work—that is, they help to improve achievement. This success is exemplified in Anacostia, an area of Washington, D.C.; in Greensville County, Virginia; in Denver, Colorado; in Gary, Indiana; and in Detroit, Michigan.

Thus, competency tests introduced in the early grades have their place when used as tools to help teachers who believe in their pupils' potential to improve the education given children. Such tests are positive teaching tools, not mechanisms to label kids as failures or to track them into paths of failure and push them out of school.

The Potential of MCT

It is true that tests may be used to create new obstacles for minority students, but such abuse is not inevitable. In the classroom, minimum-competency tests can be used as part of an early-warning system to identify students who are not learning and who should become the target of immediate efforts to use other teaching approaches or to provide other appropriate forms of remediation. Schools are helped by MCT programs that induce intensive self-examination by education professionals, school boards, and the public. The test can lead to reemphasis on the importance of basic skills. MCT can help put a stop to social promotion, and it can help furnish adequate information to the public about teaching and learning in the schools. Parents, in particular, need better information about their children's schools. MCT can lead to greater parental participation in the life of the schools by creating a needed dialogue, as when parents, teachers, and principals—and in some cases, students—work jointly to define minimum-competency standards and to set explicit achievement goals for the instructional program. Ultimately, MCT promises to help the nation reduce the appalling incidence of functional illiteracy. It can help to restore the meaning of the high school diploma and to rebuild crumbling confidence in the public schools.

Last October, at the topical conference on minimum-competency achievement testing sponsored by the American Educational Research Association in Washington, D.C. (1), Jenne Britell of Educational Testing Service explained why she believes that the call for minimum-competency standards represents what she calls "A new stage in American education." First, she said, minimum competence is a more egalitarian standard than any other ever employed in the

public schools. After more than a decade of searching for equality of opportunity, its advocates are now searching for a way to reconcile the fact of differences among individuals with the political demand for equality of achievement. Second, she went on, minimum competence may be the only truly achievable educational goal we can set, given differences among students and the limits of resources and instructional know-how. Third, minimum-competency standards constitute a universal guarantee of a kind never before asked of the public schools: a pledge that no child shall leave school as a functional illiterate. That, in the last analysis, is why minorities can and do rally to the MCT movement.

DO MINORITIES EMBRACE THE CONCEPT OF MINIMUM COMPETENCY?*

Ronald H. Lewis

The basic rationale of the minimum-competency movement, as practiced in numerous communities, is quite simple: State or local districts should set minimum standards of performance and test student proficiency in meeting those standards. While there is almost universal acceptance of the need for the concept, there is only minimal agreement on how best to attack the problem.

Minimum-Competency Testing and Competency-Based Education

There are some important distinctions that must be made among the proliferation of terms that have to do with competency. We have competency-based education, competency testing, competency standards, basic competencies, minimal competencies, competency programs, minimum-competency testing, minimum-competency standards, minimum proficiencies, competency-based evaluation, competency levels, minimal-competency requirements, and so on.

For purposes of this presentation, I think it's important to separate the concept into two dimensions: minimum-competency testing (MCT) and competency-based education (CBE). Unfortunately, there is a growing feeling that the use of minimum-competency tests will in and of itself result in greater student achievement. But tests don't teach; they look for the right answer, not the process of thought the student used to reach it.

CBE, however, may necessitate restructuring the schools and the educational process. Educational goals would be structured around specific outcomes rather than course and subject completion. Specifically stated objectives, use of various measures, if necessary, to diagnose individual needs and increase the possibility of the individualization of instruction, selection of appropriate and adaptable learning activities, flexible use of time, program evaluation, student and staff evaluation from K-12—these are all part of the philosophy of sequential and systematic CBE. Competency testing alone blames the victim for his or her accumulated deficit. Competency-based education involves a broader spectrum of education and support processes, focus-

*This is a condensation of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, April 9-11, 1979. The full text of the paper can be obtained as ED 178 615 from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

ing upon all the elements and participants in the educational enterprise, not merely the student.

Testing and Minorities

Test scores can vary from day to day and test to test. The standard error of measurement associated with scores on standardized tests is well known because it is readily determined and regularly announced by the publishers. It is also readily ignored by many.

Curricular validity and instructional validity have also become major concerns of many members of the minority community. A school system that cannot assure curricular and instructional validity should not use competency tests as a basis for denying promotion or a diploma to any of its students.

Used properly, and in conjunction with other measures, tests can be extremely helpful as part of our political, social, and educational decision-making processes. However, tests only inform such judgments; they shouldn't make them. Unless MCT is a logical outgrowth of a restructured performance-based curriculum with curricular and instructional consistency; unless MCT is used as one dimension of an accountability review of the performance level of teachers and administrators; unless local, state, and national officials resist the growing tendency to further limit resources, our minority young people will continue to be victimized, patronized, and/or excluded.

Diplomas and Remediation

Some black parents, while not opposed to MCT itself, see a possible racial motive behind testing programs established in recently desegregated communities to "protect standards." The result of such programs can be organizational resegregation within the school on the basis of test results. This resegregation penalizes the students involved but does not assure that they will ultimately master basic skills as a result of the penalty.

Other schools devise ways of helping students without separating, labeling, and alienating them. Unfortunately, few effective remedial programs have been developed and maintained, especially at the secondary level. Efforts at remediation are frequently complicated by the problems of staffing, curriculum, students' and parents' rights, materials, fatigue, scheduling, teacher contacts, and funding.

The problem of funding for remedial programs is especially acute, since there is no federal support, and state funding is experiencing difficulties of its own. As legislators discuss the concept of competencies and remediation, per-

haps they should assure us that some additional resources will go into the education of our youth.

Conclusions

Minorities do readily embrace the concept of competence. However, they do not embrace the emergence of MCT in isolation from the responsibilities that should be borne by the total system. A basic challenge is involved. It lies in the perceived contradiction between the goals of educational excellence and educational equity. At the very least, we should allow these two goals to compete equally. But it would be far better to find ways to merge these goals through multicultural curricula, preservice and inservice training, parent involvement, and above all, a system of competency-based education, not merely minimum-competency testing.

MINIMUM-COMPETENCY PROGRAMS, PROTECTED CLASSES, AND FEDERAL AGENCIES*

M. Hayes Mizell

As minimum-competency programs have gained popularity, persons who are advocates for the educational interests of racial and language minority students have become divided as to whether competency programs will benefit or harm children. On the one hand, advocates recognize that too many minority children have been and continue to be victims of educational neglect and of educators' lack of accountability to parents. On the other hand, advocates know from experience that in spite of educational innovations and the promises of pedagogy, the gap between the proclaimed benefits of an educational policy and the reality of practices at the school-building and classroom levels often works to the detriment of minority children. The experiences of advocates have taught them that allegedly beneficent programs are not immune from harmful practices that arise from poor management, ignorance, insensitivity, lethargy, discrimination, or merely good intentions gone awry.

Protective Standards for MCT

From this perspective, a set of protective standards could be generated by which minimum-competency programs should be judged.[1] These standards might include the banning of such practices as: penalizing minority students when their failure to meet required standards can be attributed to the school system; utilizing tests that, in effect, measure students' backgrounds rather than their abilities; grouping that results in creating separate classes identifiable by race or language group; and using educators' subjective judgments about student competencies and requiring students who have not been previously enrolled in the school system/state to meet mandated performance standards. These standards might also require that funds be made available for remediation and that the minimum-competency tests meet the technical standards of major professional organizations.

Though such standards have not been widely advocated, there are others that are more compelling and that educators and policy makers must take

*This is a condensation of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, April 9-11, 1979. The full text of the paper can be obtained as ED 178 617 from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

more seriously. These standards are the result of such federal legislation as Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act;[2] Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act;[3] Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments;[4] and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.[5] These laws and federal agencies' enforcement of them have had a significant impact on the way educational policies and programs are conceived and implemented at the state and local levels.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to examine how two federal agencies, the Office for Civil Rights and the Division of Education for the Disadvantaged, which are responsible for protecting and expanding the educational interests of protected classes, have addressed the competency issue; and to illustrate the relation between (a) selected federal education policies, laws, and regulations, and (b) the possible effects of state- and locally mandated minimum-competency programs on students in protected classes.[6]

The Office for Civil Rights

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is the agency charged with enforcing several civil rights laws, including Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1972 Emergency School Aid Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974.

One of the ways OCR enforces laws under its jurisdiction is to issue occasional policy memoranda in an effort to inform recipients of federal funds of their obligations under federal civil rights laws. Most OCR policies relate to issues about which there are questions and a lack of clarity concerning the applicability of certain federal civil rights laws and regulations. The memoranda interpret how federal laws and regulations under OCR's jurisdiction apply to specific programs or practices. Such policy memoranda are currently needed to clarify the application of federal civil rights laws and regulations to minimum-competency programs. State- or locally mandated minimum-competency programs could have effects that conflict with those laws and regulations. For example, school districts are often confused about OCR requirements concerning the grouping of students for instructional purposes. Or a program might penalize minority students for the effects of prior discrimination.

These and other possible consequences of minimum-competency programs were pointed out by the author in a letter to the Atlanta regional office of OCR in September 1977.[7] Though a high priority was assigned to developing OCR policies in regard to minimum-competency programs, little progress has been made on substantive issues. OCR staff members have said that a policy or guideline may be ready by the fall of 1979.[8]

Title I and Minimum-Competency Programs

The Division of Education for the Disadvantaged (DED) is a part of the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education of the U.S. Office of Education and is responsible for administering Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Under Title I, the federal government provides $3.5 billion to states to meet the special needs of about 6.5 million disadvantaged children in local school systems.

The possible conflicts between Title I and minimum-competency programs must be understood within the context of Title I law and regulations. Children participating in programs funded by Title I are supposed to receive what all other children receive as part of the regular school program and then receive supplemental assistance paid for with Title I funds.[9] Because there is not enough Title I money to provide extra programs and services for all the eligible children, the regulations include a "concentration-of-service" requirement, which mandates that students *most* in need participate in Title I programs.[10]

Because Title I is regarded by many people as a remedial program, and because many minimum-competency programs require remediation after students' basic-skills deficiencies are identified, the use of Title I funds may be seen by some school officials as a way to underwrite the cost of such remediation. In response to the author's inquiry concerning the relationship between Title I regulations and the potential use of Title I funds for assistance in carrying out the mandates of minimum-competency programs, the U.S. Commissioner of Education pointed out that there are restrictions on the use of Title I funds to provide the remediation required by state- or locally mandated competency programs.[11] However, the Commissioner also explained that if state and local funds were provided for the remediation of skill deficiencies and if used in a manner "which is fair and equitable to Title I participants," Title I funds could be used in connection with a state's mandated minimum-competency program. The Commissioner's letter is apparently the only document that the Office of Education or DED has ever developed that addresses this subject.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed two examples of federal agencies which administer laws fundamental to the protection and advancement of the educational interests of minority children. Provisions of these laws can be construed as protective standards that may provide the major potential for enforceable safeguards for the educational interests of minority students participating in minimum-competency programs. However, if that potential is to be realized, federal

agencies with appropriate jurisdictions must take greater initiatives to examine how the laws and regulations they administer relate to minimum-competency programs. While we do not know how detrimental the current lack of initiative may be to the educational interests of minority children, the possibility of harm is certainly increased by the absence of promulgated policies and legal interpretations.

Scholars, researchers, and policy analysts can play a valuable role in bringing clarity to this issue. They can study specific federal agencies that administer education programs or enforce laws related to them. They can also look at how the laws under the jurisdiction of those agencies may affect the current or future consequences of minimum-competency programs. As a result of their studies, they can determine whether those federal agencies should devote more attention to the minimum-competency issue. Among the agencies where study is particularly needed are the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice,[12] the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, the Office of Bilingual Education, and the Office of Indian Education in USOE.

So far, the interest in minimum-competency programs on the part of the two federal agencies described in this paper has been largely reactive. Whether a reactive role is in the best educational interests of protected classes or even consistent with the spirit of those agencies' administrative and enforcement obligations is questionable. The appropriate role can be determined only by a careful analysis of the laws under which those agencies operate and of the ways in which those laws relate to the effects of minimum-competency programs on protected classes of students. Meanwhile, minimum-competency programs are being implemented, protected classes of students are being affected by them, and there are no recognized or enforced standards to assure that the educational interests of those students will be protected.

Notes

[1]Some of these standards are more thoroughly discussed in Southeastern Public Education Program (7), Center for Law and Education (2), and McClung (4).

[2]42 United States Code (U.S.C.), 200d. The 1974 United States Supreme Court decision in *Lau* v. *Nichols* (414 U.S. 563) extended Title VI to protect children with limited English-speaking ability.

[3]20 U.S.C., 2701.

[4]20 U.S.C., 1681.

[5]29 U.S.C., 794.

[6]A more extensive analysis and additional illustrations can be found in Rosewater (6) and McClung (5).

[7]Letter from the author to Lamar Clements, Elementary and Secondary Education Branch Chief, Region III OCR, September 27, 1977.

[8]As ascertained in telephone interviews with selected OCR personnel, February-April 1979.

[9]45 C.F.R., Part 116, 40(b).

[10]45 C.F.R., Part 116a. 21(d).

[11]Letter to the author from Ernest Boyer, September 26, 1977.

[12]In a letter of December 15, 1978, to Drew Days, assistant attorney general for civil rights of the Department of Justice, the author requested information concerning activities of the Civil Rights Division regarding the possible civil rights implications of minimum-competency programs. To date, no answer has been received.

MINIMUM-COMPETENCY TESTING: THE NEWEST OBSTRUCTION TO THE EDUCATION OF BLACK AND OTHER DISADVANTAGED AMERICANS*

Hugh J. Scott

Introduction

Among the white and black supporters of minimum-competency testing (MCT) are many who genuinely believe or hope that such testing will produce improvements in the education of black and other disadvantaged minority students. I am prepared to accept almost any scheme that offers real potential for the elimination of race and socioeconomic conditions as the primary determinants of success or failure in school, but I cannot jump on the MCT bandwagon. I consider MCT to be an ill-advised, inadequate, and inappropriate approach to mental measurement for white and black students.

The initiation of statewide MCT programs and the "back-to-basics" movement are manifestations of an ever-increasing dissatisfaction among white Americans with escalating costs and alleged deficiencies of public education. The words "back to" or "return to" in the basic-education movement imply that somewhere in the past, American schools did indeed place greater stress on the basics and that because of that stress, students did perform satisfactorily in the basic skills. I disagree with any claim that public or private education has at any time responded effectively to the educational needs of blacks and other disadvantaged minorities.

Tests and Testing

A major focus of the public's push for accountability in education is directed to a return to the basics in education with a companion drive for the establishment of MCT programs in each state. The emergence of these programs has served to intensify the controversy that has historically surrounded the issues of the relevancy and validity of achievement tests.

Achievement tests of all kinds are so often routinely and mechanically used that many educators have stopped thinking about their limitations and benefits. Tests are among the most important evaluative and prognostic tools that

*This is a condensation of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, April 9-11, 1979. The full text of the paper can be obtained as ED 178 618 from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

educators have at their disposal, but improvements in their quality and sensitivity have to be matched by gains in the ways in which they are selected and used.

One of the most important complaints registered against achievement tests is the charge of cultural bias. The achievement tests that are educationally most detrimental and culturally most biased are those that are geared to the sorting and labeling of students and that serve to stigmatize some students as inferior, to limit exposure and interaction among students with different labels, and to narrow the social and occupational options opened to students upon completion of school. The more acceptable, though still imperfect, achievement tests are those that give the most extensive consideration to the influences of socioeconomic factors in the design of the test and the construction of test items.

Some Positive and Negative Aspects of MCT

The negative effects of MCT weigh most heavily upon those who fail to pass the tests. Blacks and other disadvantaged minorities repeatedly score lower than other students on norm-referenced achievement tests and can be expected to display this same pattern on minimum-competency tests. What do you do with or for students—black and white—who have not passed, perhaps cannot pass, minimum levels of proficiency? How many chances should such students get, and do you lower standards so that they can pass? These questions underscore the complexities that rise to the surface when this use of achievement tests is considered.

School systems with large numbers of blacks and other disadvantaged students need to know much more about why students are not performing at acceptable levels and what can be done to make teaching and learning more effective. MCT is a misguided utilization of a school system's financial and personnel resources. It offers no valuable indications as to how teaching and learning can be improved. MCT programs are imposed on the many but are, in fact, designed to identify the relatively small percentage of students who do not perform at minimum levels of proficiency in the basic skills.

There is no school district in this nation serving a large black student population that is not suffering from constraints imposed by grossly inadequate funds for critical programs and services. White Americans control the determination of funding levels for these school systems and are registering too many complaints about the escalating costs of education to support significant increases in funding for predominantly black school systems. Since the implementation of MCT will not be accompanied by additional funds to cope with deeply rooted and complex educational problems, it can only spur accusatory declarations.

Some Questions that Ought to be Addressed

When considering the design of an MCT program, we must address a variety of questions. In the formulation of the essential elements of the basics in education, what consideration must be given to students with truly exceptional needs, to the wide range of student abilities in a heterogeneous school population, and to critical areas of noncognitive development? In defining minimum competencies, what consideration should be given to differences in the life experiences of students and to the influence of variables outside the control of the school? What consideration should be given to worthwhile objectives that cannot be achieved within a school year or are not measured by the tests? Will MCT provide additional significant information? What influence should MCT results have on the formulation of educational objectives, on the retention of students, or on judgments about teacher performance? Will MCT programs contribute to improving student performance and/or teacher effectiveness? What safeguards should be established to prevent tracking, labeling, and denial of access for students who do not perform well? Will MCT programs influence allocation of state funds and will they evolve into national achievement testing?

Conclusion

Educators in heavily black school systems have enough problems trying to cope with the uses and misuses of the more traditional forms of achievement tests without heaping upon them the burdens and disadvantages of minimum-competency tests. These tests generate types of information that promote public misunderstanding and are subject to misuse by policy-making bodies. The conceptual deficiencies of MCT as well as the potential negative consequences it may very well engender are sufficient reasons for broad opposition within the educational profession.

In summary, these are my objections to MCT programs, with particular reference to their effect on disadvantaged minority students:

1. Minimum-competency tests are the most poorly conceived and provide the least useful information of all the various forms of achievement tests.
2. Minimal performance standards applied to all students in a particular classroom or grade level are contradictory to contemporary knowledge about the variability in patterns of human growth and development and about variability in the range of intellectual potential that exists in a classroom or a grade level.

3. MCT programs often are geared more to an exposé of underachievement in the schools to "stir the laggards" than to a constructive examination of the underachiever.

4. The personnel and financial resources of school systems with large numbers of disadvantaged minority students, which are already critically inadequate, would be diverted to the implementation of the various aspects of MCT with no significant contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning.

5. MCT programs give no attention to the importance of noncognitive variables and to the influence of variables outside the control of the school that may detract from the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

6. Minimum-competency tests lend themselves more readily than other tests to the mislabeling of students and to the restriction of options for students.

7. Test results from MCT programs, more often than not, will be cited as justification for a return to homogeneous grouping, which will lead to the separation of students by social class and by race in those school systems in which black students constitute the largest number of students from low-income families.

8. MCT programs, with their integral ties to the back-to-basics movement, will exert a restrictive influence on educational goals and objectives, especially in school systems with large numbers of minority students, and will be a factor in the elimination or reduction of courses and programs that make school more enjoyable and conducive to learning because of the low priority accorded to qualities not measured by minimum-competency tests.

9. MCT programs, by the documentation of underachievement in the basic skills by minority students, will arouse the prejudices of racists and others who are unsympathetic to the problems and needs of the disadvantaged.

10. Particularly detrimental to the education of minorities is the strong probability that minimum floors will eventually become the general educational standards and that pressures to have students satisfy minimum standards will result in a widespread lowering of all standards.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ISSUES AND A PROPOSAL FOR DEALING WITH THEM

Robert A. Feldmesser

The authors of these papers have pointed to a number of possible beneficial effects of minimum-competency testing (MCT) and also to many potential deleterious effects. Policy makers searching for a constructive position or readers trying to make up their minds about policies that have been proposed may feel themselves pulled first one way, then the other; now convinced that MCT is even more advantageous for minority-group than for majority-group students, now concerned that it may become another form of victimization unless it is hedged about with restraints, now convinced that nothing could prevent it from doing injury to precisely the most vulnerable parts of the population. But perhaps we are in this situation only because we have not found the most constructive way of implementing MCT.

There seemed to be general agreement among the authors about five possible favorable outcomes of MCT, though they expressed them with varying degrees of confidence and caution:

1. It could improve students' performance in the basic skills. The mechanism by which this might occur is not clear; as Lewis intimated, it would not happen by fiat. Learning cannot be made compulsory. My own suspicion is that MCT will raise performance levels only insofar as students themselves come to recognize the need for having a document that testifies to their competence. In other words, it is the credentialling function of MCT that will make it "work"—that will give students a positive incentive for learning. Not incidentally, the MCT credential would be of special benefit to minority-group students in another respect: It would provide them with objective evidence of at least minimum competence—a counterweight to discriminatory impulses. On the other hand, it is true that, as several authors emphasized, MCT will be ineffective as a spur to learning if it is not accompanied by adequately supported efforts to raise the performance level of those who initially fall below the standard; and of course its effects will be greatly diminished if the standard is set so low that most students would be able to meet it without learning more than students now seem to know.

2. It could provide uniform and reliable information to the public about the effectiveness of the instructional system. However, as Scott in particular pointed out, an MCT program cannot be justified on the ground that it will show the system to be less effective with minority-group students than with others; that is already well known, and it is hardly to be expected otherwise

so long as minority-group students are the victims of so many forms of disadvantagement.* It should also be noted that just as a student's low scores do not indicate what needs to be done to improve them, neither does a system's low score furnish clues to the remedial actions that need to be taken. It is often assumed that "low-quality teaching" is at fault, but it is not easy to know exactly what that is or what to do about it, and an instructional system consists of much more than just teachers. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, it is hard to deny that information about student performance is an essential first step in determining where action is needed and an important monitoring device to help find out whether the actions taken are having the desired effect.

3. An MCT program could stimulate greater public participation in educational processes and policy making, if only because of the political necessity to involve the public in the setting of a performance standard.

4. If student performance is improved, and if the public has better information about student performance and is taking a more active part in formulating educational policy, then it ought to follow that public confidence in its school system will increase, which in turn should, among other things, make possible greater financial support of the system.

5. An MCT program would be an important symbol of egalitarianism: All students would be subject to the same expectation of performance and would be judged by the same objective criterion of whether they have met it.

In the cases of other benefits claimed for MCT programs in these papers, some skepticism is in order. For example, Down said that MCT amounts to "a pledge that no child shall leave school as a functional illiterate." But because learning cannot be forced, that is a pledge that no school, and no society, can make. It is also argued that MCT will "restore meaning" to the high school diploma. But is is not altogether clear that the diploma has really "lost" meaning; there is no evidence that either employers or college admissions officers are asking for it less now than they used to. Besides, the most that MCT can do is give to the diploma the "meaning" that the bearer possesses minimum skills, which narrows the meaning of the diploma rather than restoring it.

On the other hand, some of the alarms raised about MCT also seem to be

*It is interesting that none of the speakers paid much attention to the issue of so-called cultural bias in testing instruments. It seemed to be the assumption—which I share—that the test-performance differences between minority-group students are owed far more to massive and accumulated social and economic deprivations than to "biased" item selection or item phraseology. Indeed, there would be something defective about a test that did not reflect these deprivations. Of course, this does not eliminate the necessity of taking care to avoid irrelevant bias in the instruments.

unconvincing. I do not believe that testing of the basic skills will diminish the attention given to other school subjects, as Scott seems to fear. The high school diploma will continue to require a minimum level of performance in literature, science, social studies, and other disciplines in order to earn the specified number of credits; and as I have suggested, there is no reason to think that the diploma is becoming obsolete.

Another of the dangers of MCT that was alluded to in the papers is that test results can be misinterpreted. Test scores are sometimes used to label students inaccurately or irrevocably (and an irrevocable label eventually becomes, in a large proportion of cases, an inaccurate one). Such misinterpretation is especially likely in the case of minority-group students; they do tend to score relatively low, and persons seeking excuses for continued discrimination are only too glad to seize upon that fact as "evidence of innate inferiority." There is much in the history of this society that indicates that MCT scores will be used in that way. However, as Down said, misinterpretation is not inherent in the tests. Misuse of information is a perennial problem—and not only in connection with test scores; but in a democratic society, the misuse of information cannot serve as a legitimate reason for depriving ourselves of knowledge.

A more serious objection to MCT is that it contains the potential for inherently discriminatory effects on minority groups. The authors have warned us that this could happen in a number of ways. If passing the test is prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma (or a "full-fledged," unqualified diploma), then those who fail are perhaps being penalized for having had an inadequate instructional system—something that is beyond their control. Especially (though not exclusively) where this inadequacy was a part of deliberate segregation and other forms of disadvantagement for minority groups, MCT would become another instance of "blaming the victim." (Furthermore, the minority-group student thus penalized has fewer alternative resources to draw upon than a majority-group classmate who may also fail to meet the MCT standard.) Ironically, because so large a proportion of disadvantaged students are from minority groups, efforts to raise their performance level with remedial instruction can lead to the internal resegregation of schools.* Yet setting the standard low merely to make it possible for most minority-group students to meet it would be patronizing toward them.

*Mizell's paper hints at an even more excruciating problem in the case of handicapped students. Discrimination may be charged if handicapped students (a) are not permitted to take the MCT test at all, (b) are offered a test (or a test-based diploma) which in some way takes account of their handicap, or (c) are permitted to take the same test as all other students and then fail it.

A Proposed Structure for MCT

It appears, then, that MCT can achieve desirable ends but also may engender undesirable consequences. The goal of educational policy, of course, ought to be to obtain the former while avoiding the latter. It seems to me that this can be accomplished with the proper structuring of an MCT program, which would consist of three main elements:

First, the MCT credential should be entirely separate from the high school diploma. The two have quite different meanings, and combining them in a single document leads to a loss of information. Keeping the two separate also avoids the danger that students who anticipate failing the minimum-competency test will drop out of school in the realization that, even if they stay, they will have no tangible evidence of their years of schooling to present to employers or others.

Second, meeting the minimum-competency standard should be a voluntary act on the part of the student, not a requirement imposed by the school or the state. Indeed, once MCT has been divorced from award of the diploma, it becomes "intrinsically" voluntary, and this corresponds to the intrinsically voluntary nature of learning.

However, to say that meeting the minimum-competency standard should be voluntary is not to say that society can be indifferent to whether students meet it or not. Mastery of the basic skills is so important to the well-being of every individual that society has an obligation to help everyone attain it; and a population which is literate and numerate has great social benefits as well. Thus, the third element in the structure of an MCT program should be that instruction in the basic skills is made available to every person, in suitable and reasonably convenient form and at public expense, until such time as he or she has attained the specified minimum-competency score, *however long that might take*. By this policy, the state would not only emphasize the importance of the basic skills but would also signal its belief that every person is capable of acquiring them—no matter the race or ethnicity or degree of initial disadvantagement.

Taken together, these three structural elements would create an MCT program that would operate in the following fashion: All children would receive instruction in the basic skills while in school. At about the ninth or tenth grade, the minimum-competency test would be administered to all students who wished to take it. Those who reached the standard that had been set would receive a certificate to that effect and they would then continue—or perhaps not continue—with their high school education, subject to whatever conditions already existed in their school district and to whatever considerations they brought to the decision personally. Those who did not reach the standard would be offered remedial instruction—preferably in the form of individual-

ized instruction in one of their regular classes—in order to avoid resegregation where that was a danger. This instruction would be elective with the students. Students who had failed the test the first time would be permitted to take it again in the eleventh grade, with the same possible outcomes, and again, if necessary, in the twelfth grade.

Students who had not met the standard by the twelfth grade (or who had chosen not to take it at any of the administrations) would nevertheless be awarded their high school diploma if they met the other requirements for it that the state and the school board had set. At any time after they left school, and whether or not they had earned a diploma, they would be able to apply to a state agency for further instruction to prepare themselves for the test, and this agency would be obliged to respond by providing educational counseling and by arranging for suitable instruction at a convenient time and place (which would not necessarily be within a school). When they felt ready, they would take the test at its next administration. If they passed, they would receive their certificate; if not, they could resume instruction, immediately or at any later time, until they did reach the minimum-competency score. No charge would be made for any of these services.

This context of MCT—which I have elsewhere (3) referred to as "the establishment of minimum-competency as a right"—provides an incentive to meet the MCT standard, because employers and college-admissions officers will presumably begin to inquire if applicants have their certificate, much as they now inquire about the high school diploma. Yet the initiative for meeting the standard lies with the student, as is appropriate to a learning experience. Students may not appreciate the usefulness of basic skills until after they have left school, but when they do gain that appreciation, they will be ready to learn. Because meeting the standard is voluntary and not limited in time, pressure to keep the standard patronizingly low is removed. At the same time, the state does not simply leave prospective learners to shift for themselves in a frequently discriminatory system, but instead acknowledges its obligation to provide help whenever it is needed and wanted toward the achievement of a goal that the state itself—by the very creation of a minimum-competency standard—proclaims to be essential for every person. Since the diploma is retained as a separate document, schools—and students who want a diploma—will continue to be concerned with the full range of subject matter.

Finally, these arrangements might even obviate the need for many of the legal protections discussed by Mizell, for the structure would be inherently nondiscriminatory—a response to the present needs of each individual without regard to the origin of the needs or to any sort of social categorization. It would build into the educational system a premise that all civilized societies should support: Every person should and can be helped to attain a level of minimum competency.

References

1. Britell, J. History of minimum-competency testing. In Richard M. Jaeger and Carol Kehr Tittle (Eds.), *Minimum-competency achievement testing*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1979.
2. Center for Law and Education. Memorandum to Robert J. Shapiro, Florida Legal Services. Cambridge, Mass.: July 13, 1977.
3. Feldmesser, R. A. Minimum competency as an individual right. In Richard M. Jaeger and Carol Kehr Tittle (Eds.), *Minimum-competency achievement testing*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1979.
4. McClung, M. Competency testing: potential for discrimination. *Clearinghouse Review*, September 1977, 439-448.
5. McClung, M. School classification: some legal approaches to labels. *Inequality in Education*, July 1973, No. 14, 17-37.
6. Rosewater, A. *Minimum-competency testing programs and handicapped students: perspectives on policy and practice*. Washington: Institute for Educational Leadership, George Washington University, 1979.
7. Southeastern Public Education Program, American Friends Service Committee. *A citizen's introduction to minimum-competency programs for students*. Columbia, S.C.: SPEP, 1978.